LOBBY

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Defiance

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LOBBY

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"When your ideas shatter established thought, expect blowback."

TIM FARGO

Architectural Writing

Photography: David Cross. Unité de Marseilles in Marseilles, Le Corbusier, 2013.

at a Transversal Moment

Words by Stylianos Giamarelos

On the occasion of the upcoming publication of her new book, Jane Rendell discusses how psychoanalysis, art, feminism and political activism shaped her peculiar brand of thinking and writing about architecture.

Those who follow Jane Rendell's work can easily discern a pattern in her output: she consistently comes out with a new book every five years. Those who have not only read her books but also worked with her, highlight her capacity to churn out ideas and provide constructive feedback that can move their work forward into unexplored terrain. If this is often the case, it is precisely because Rendell's thinking moves and associates freely, traversing the standard disciplinary boundaries and categorisations. Her latest book *The Architecture of Psychoanalysis: Spaces of Transition*, is no exception. Almost ready to hit the shelves now, the book gave LOBBY the perfect opportunity to meet Rendell and discuss her research, teaching, learning and writing practices. As I write these lines in the aftermath of an intellectually rigorous—and occasionally emotional—encounter, I feel that these initial impressions have also been confirmed through the enthusiasm that underlies Rendell's work.

So, what is the story behind your upcoming book?

I can trace it all back to 2001 when my partner and I found some photographs in a derelict house in the Green Belt of London, which I later found out was called May Morn. The house's name actually refers to socialism in a certain period of British history involving the Labour Movement and May Day. So, we found these photographs and I later used them in an exhibition, but I didn't really think much more about the buildings that were in the photographs for another 10 years. You know, it is a bit embarrassing in retrospect. Some of them are definitely architectural 'icons', and as an architectural historian I should have recognised those that were designed by Tecton, for instance. Once I realised that they were all post-war housing estates from the 1960s, it became easier to put the whole thing together. Around the same time, I was reading Owen Hatherley's *Militant Modernism* (2009). The book reminded me of Russian Constructivism, which I had been interested in as a student, and the Narkomfin project—a communal house that was not fully-fledged, but transitional. At the same time, I was also doing work on the psychoanalytic setting as a transitional space, because it is located between the analyst (with his or her suggestions) and the analysand (with his or her speech and free associations). So, I tried to draw a parallel between these two types of transitional space, thinking about transitional space as a space of change, so also linking it to the transition town movement. At the time I started writing the book, there was a big debate around peak oil and the need to find a transition to a low or even no-carbon economy. So, I was thinking about transition psychically, politically and socially. The book finishes with the current housing crisis. That's where the book ends, and that's probably what I am going develop in future work, which is about to begin.

Was this the first time you were tackling this sort of issues, though?

I guess we could go back even earlier than 2001, because as I went on writing the book, I started to realise that I'd been interested in transitional space in many different ways from the very beginning of my academic career—and possibly also when I was working as an architect in social housing. As a BArch student I was looking at threshold spaces; in fact, my dissertation was called "The Pyramid and the Labyrinth". It was a gendered analysis of architectural space contrasting patriarchal pyramids with labyrinthine spaces. It wasn't essentialist, mind you—it looked at architectural design with feminine values in relation to social ideas about care. I ended up suggesting that Aldo van Eyck's and Herman Hertzberger's work on threshold spaces offered a spatial model between the pyramid and the labyrinth. I suppose all the interdisciplinary work that I've done since concerns threshold spaces and transition—you could argue that social life is structured around transitional spaces and those relations you make with others.

How do you see this new book relating to your earlier work, possibly starting from your *Pursuit of Pleasure* (2002)?

Well, maybe this book is a return to architectural history. *The Pursuit of Pleasure* is an architectural history that is informed by feminist theory. I moved

away from that when I started teaching in an art school. At that time I became more interested in artistic practice and art criticism. And then, through developing my practice of site-writing as a situated form of art criticism, I became more interested in what that critical and spatial modes of practice could do in relation to urban criticism and to architecture. In a way, the new book is taking these processes of site-writing that I've developed in response to art, back into architecture. Having said that, I don't see the art-related work as just an 'excursion'; it has fundamentally changed the way I think about practice, and the way that I write. For me, an encounter with another pedagogic experience or practice or a body of literature from another discipline has evolved the way that I work—and I think that is likely to be the case for many researchers.

In the meantime, the way that art and architecture relate has also shifted, though.

That's true. In the early 1990s —well, in London at least—you had FAT and muf as very influential collaborative art-architecture practices. I think you see more of that kind of practice now, maybe also related to this condition of enforced austerity. You see self-initiated projects, younger people no longer necessarily wanting to go on and work for commercial architects, but to set up and direct their own practice, to engage in some kinds of gallery-based work too. I mean, the fact that Assemblage was shortlisted for the Turner Prize is a really interesting indicator of where we might be now. In my *Art and Architecture* book (2006), I talk about two different disciplines and what forms of practice in between them or at their cross-over points might look like. But I think we are now in a much more transversal moment—it has become quite artificial to separate the artistic from the architectural, one discipline from another.

Moss Green/May Morn, 2001.

"We are now in a much more transversal moment—it has become quite artificial to separate the artistic from the architectural."

What has changed in your approach to architectural history in this decade between your earlier and most recent work, then?

A couple of things: One would be the really different way I handle theory now. When I was working on *The Pursuit of Pleasure*, which was my PhD thesis, I was very passionate about the work of Luce Irigaray. It's still very important, but I'm slightly more reflective about it now. Looking back, I think that the history I am doing in that book is slightly over-determined by the theory. Irigaray was talking about what I understood as a choreography of the spatial relations between the sexes—the spatialisation of sexual difference, the choreography of the gendered body in spaces in early 19th Century London. Her conceptualisations of women as circulating commodities also offered me ways of thinking about whether women were themselves commodities, or the buyers and sellers of commodities in early 19th Century London, and also the relationship between patriarchy and capitalism. On the one hand, there was a patriarchal urge wishing for middle-class women to stay in the house—to be good wives and mothers—but the capitalist drive wanted them to be consumers. And of course there is the class issue, with working-class women present but ignored in the public realm, and middle-class women becoming more visible as valuable forms of property—as a form of conspicuous consumption.

With this feminist version of Marx's commodity theory in mind, I entered the archive. The fact that I had read a theoretical text prior to entering the archive was suggestive. The theory suggested to me what I might want to find in the archives; maybe, as a result, I missed things because of what I already thought I knew and was already intending to look for. I don't know, but there is an interesting interplay between the two—between theory and history—to consider. What I don't think I did in the book, looking back now, is to use the historical evidence more to challenge the theory. So, in a way the theory remained quite intact. What I am more interested in now is association and analogy as a method. So, I am interested in laying out a story about transitional spaces in psychoanalysis and laying out a story about transitional spaces in architecture, and then exploring the crossovers and associations between these two strands. I am also looking at how that might work on the page with text and images, so I am much more involved in the design of the book than earlier. I love the way the designer—Marit Munzberg—interprets graphically what I am trying to do conceptually.

The other thing that's changed is more unsettling. When I was a student, I was an outspoken feminist. In my first year I was totally opposed to what we were being taught, a bit rebellious and maybe in that sense not a very 'good' student; I couldn't see beyond the feminist politics and what I could learn from the so-called 'male masters' like Le Corbusier. Why should I study a modern male architect? But in this book I decided—because of the photographs I found—that the time had come to return to these very iconic projects by male architects, like the Narkomfin, the Unité and Roehampton. Perhaps my attempt to connect the story of these buildings with my work on psychoanalysis, might help me say something new about these buildings, to see them in a different way. And thanks to my training in architectural history, I have also gone back to what other architectural historians have written before me. I have learned an amazing amount from the secondary sources—from Jean-Louis Cohen's, Catherine Cooke's and Nicholas Bullock's relevant studies.

Photography: Jane Rendell.

Narkomfin Communal House, Moscow, 1928–1929.

How did your engagement with feminism develop over the years?

Well, it's been an 'in-and-out' process really, and I am heading back in again now. I think feminism has changed over this period too. When I was doing my history dissertation for my BArch back in 1988, there were only two or three books on feminism in architecture. So, I was more interested in relevant feminist developments in other disciplines, like anthropology and geography. After that time, I worked in a feminist architectural cooperative. It was an environment that helped me think about women users, discrimination in the building industry and the profession at large. During that phase, feminism was more of a lived experience for me. I picked up the academic thread again when I came back to study for my Masters, and by that time the literature had started to develop; Beatriz Colomina's book on *Sexuality and Space* (1992) had come out, and I also contributed to this developing interdisciplinary discourse through the *Gender Space Architecture* book I co-edited with Iain Borden and Barbara Penner (1999). But it was only during my PhD that I really started to think about what feminism could offer as a critical academic method over other conventional methodologies in architectural history. And that's when I started to think about autobiography and the use of the 'I' voice as a way of challenging those apparently neutral, objective approaches. If I had known at that point about Donna Haraway's work on situated knowledge, it would have been great, but I think that parallel developments also came out of my own work—the understanding that knowledge is situated has become really key to my work. It comes out of feminism but it is not only important for women.

Sometimes when I have taught feminist texts, I have seen people rolling their eyes, particularly young women feeling pressurised by feminism and not relating to it, while some men responded that this is literature by women for women, so it might not be relevant for them (that is why Alice Jardine's 2009 edited collection *Men in Feminism* is so important for developing an understanding of how feminism is relevant for men as well as women). The more negative episodes in my teaching experiences meant I was ambivalent for a while; I didn't want to force the issue. I think that this kind of work has to come from a shared sense of urgency. I found it difficult to introduce feminism from a neutral perspective after having had a few negative experiences of my own concerning sexual discrimination, but opening people's eyes to this in a positive way, empowering them, teaching them how to be critical, that takes a while to work out. However, my experience from young women over the last few years confirms a flourishing of feminism all over again. It is a very lively scene again today; it's quite inclusive, from liberal to radical perspectives, and from those working in collectives currently, to those writing their own histories of the 1980s. The recent work at the *AJ* concerning discrimination in the profession has also made the issues topical and been extremely invigorating.

What was the relation between your research and teaching practices over the years?

When I first got into teaching, I concentrated on materials I was also researching. Devising my first courses got me thinking about pedagogy. After my initial studio-training, I have found the split between studio-based teaching and the seminars of architectural history rather frustrating. So, I have been interested in how you can work across those models, and how you can teach history and theory in a more studio-based

environment through intensive workshop modes. You still need to have a curriculum, but it might not be as predictable as usual; different things might happen according to what might come out of a creative writing workshop, and this can inform research trajectories too. It was actually a student comment on site-writing a few years earlier that got me rethinking about the temporality of site-writing. That's one of the privileges you enjoy in such an interactive teaching environment: shared insights and ideas. In the more activist work I have been doing over the last couple of years, I have become less interested in the ownership of knowledge and more interested in what people can do together. In the academy, though, your research output is usually assessed in terms of sole authorship. However, in urgent problems like housing, much more can be done collectively. I thus tend to oscillate between the two—sole authorship and working with others, and time alone and time shared. I would like to see site-writing, which has mostly been driven by my own voice so far, becoming something more participatory than that.

How does political activism feed in to your work?

Back in the 1990s, I was very much into movements like the Cuban Solidarity Campaign and Architects Against Apartheid, and I belonged to the Socialist Workers Party and WAFER (Women Architects for Equal Representation). Maybe it was when I did my PhD and became more immersed in the academic environment and the need to critique academic methods that I felt less of a need to intervene in the so-called 'real world'; or maybe there were not so many pressing issues, or perhaps I didn't feel them. I don't know, but it does really feel at the moment that we are under assault, you know, from so many sides. The climate change crisis is not something I have followed as thoroughly from the beginning as I should have, but having now looked at the literature and the evidence, it is astounding why more things aren't happening in the face of the conclusions reached. I have tried to offer critique on that front in UCL around the BHP Billiton funding, but I don't really like confrontation, you know; I find it unsettling and stressful. Politically, questions must be asked; emotionally, I like to be more discursive and less combative. Yet there are certain matters where I reach a limit and know I must act, and I am finding ways of working with people who have different limits or different value systems. I am currently negotiating those differences through the Ethics in the Built Environment research project.

The enforced austerity programme as an agenda for dismantling the welfare state is another pressing issue that also touches upon me directly as a leaseholder in a social housing estate. Issues that I have been discussing with colleagues like Ben Campkin and the UCL Urban Lab have suddenly become very, very real in my own life and neighbourhood—for example in the Aylesbury Estate in South London now. I am trying to relate my concerns around fossil fuel funding and the current housing crisis; I am thinking about a project on work/home displacements. What would link the two is ethics; and that is the work I've been doing in order to build a network within UCL around ethics in the built environment research. While our research ethics regulations at UCL have been devised through the model of medicine, I have been thinking about what different ethical models emerge in the humanities, design and participatory research—regarding covert research, for instance, and the vulnerability of the researching as well as the researched subject.

> "I have become less interested in the ownership of knowledge and more interested in what people can do together."

I am reading philosophy to help develop my understanding of ethics—in terms of Foucault and Butler, for instance, about how one relates to another. I am thinking, on the one hand, about displacement in terms of my own home —and the shift in the Bartlett from an academic office-based culture to open-plan working; for peace and quiet, I work more at home now. The institution has managed to outsource or displace one set of costs onto its employees, but also, because of the demolition of social housing estates, how being 'at home' as a site of work as well as leisure is no longer secure. On the other hand, 'at work', in the university, I have been engaged in the movement of funds from one site to another, and in tracing the source of that funding back to the displacement of people from their homes as a result of fossil fuel extraction. Lots to tie together, hopefully I can use my method of site-writing as a way to configure displacements.

I am not saying that you have to have lived through something in order to be galvanised, but perhaps, as is the case with a lot of activism, there is usually some kind of trigger for action to take place. In the past I was a bit wary of the impact assessment of academic work. I agreed that our research should influence life outside the academy, but the ways of measuring this seemed wrong, and quite often impact is constructed around more scientific models such as prototyping and commercial contracts. However, when doing work recently as an academic expert for the Public Inquiry into the Compulsory Purchase Orders on the Aylesbury Estate, I really saw how my research in architectural history could be more directly useful. It got me thinking: what could the work and knowledge produced by our Bachelors, Masters and PhD students do in these concrete situations? And suddenly things feel so much more alive. ♦

Photography: David Cross, 2013.

Westminster City Council, Churchill Gardens by Powell and Moya, London, 1950–1962.